Final-Year Transition and Service-Learning: Working Together as a Vehicle for Student Engagement, Development, and Life Preparedness

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Preparation for the demands of the 21st-century workplace is an essential priority and growing concern of both students pursuing postsecondary degrees and the faculty and administrators responsible for educating them. For institutions of higher education, demands such as graduate employability, life preparedness, and emotional stability are consistently becoming more complex to support. Research demonstrates a range of high-impact practices (HIPs) that directly influence student engagement and support student development. How can these HIPs help prepare students for post-university life? This article highlights two research projects: one that explored the post-university transition of recent graduates, and another that explored the HIP of service-learning. Using the “what, so what, now what” framework, the article presents each study and its relevant findings. Implications of those findings are then synthesized by examining the two study topics through a single lens in order to identify transferable institutional strategies for preparing graduating students using service-learning pedagogy.

Keywords: high-impact practices, student engagement, service-learning pedagogy, final-year transition, career preparedness, post-university transition

Awareness of and preparation for the demands of the 21st-century workplace are essential priorities and growing concerns of both students pursuing postsecondary degrees and the faculty and administrators responsible for educating them (A. Perry, 2012). For institutions of higher education, demands such as graduate employability, work readiness, life preparedness, and emotional stability are consistently becoming more complex to identify and support (Gardner & Perry, 2011). Recently, general efforts associated with supporting university students have been framed by George Kuh’s (2005, 2008, 2013) work focusing on student engagement. A decade of research has led to the identification of ten high-impact practices (HIPs), which are teaching and learning practices that foster student involvement and engagement. (For an exhaustive list of HIPs, see https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips.) There has been limited research into the influence of the HIP referred to as service-learning on students’ transition from university to life-after-study (A. Perry, 2012). Moreover, preparedness for this transition has come under scrutiny, as highlighted by the current emphasis on economic (employability), political (public higher education funding), and educational (higher education purpose/career preparation) readiness (Arum & Roksa, 2011; McCrory, 2014). This review synthesizes findings from our dissertations (A. Perry, 2012; L. Perry, 2011), which comprise a call for further research addressing the influence of service-learning on the post-university transition, namely in relation to career preparedness and emotional stability.
This article is divided into three parts based on Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle, which employs the “what, so what, now what” framework of reflection and inquiry. In the first part, two research projects (A. Perry, 2012; L. Perry, 2011) are reviewed to lay the foundation for the “what.” The first review addresses the concept of the post-university transition—from the perspective of qualitative research—and identifies the elements associated with it, so that institutions can more directly, intentionally, and successfully address the transition process and prepare their students for it. The second review focuses on a mixed-methods study of the influence of service-learning on student engagement and elements of the experience integral to engagement. Each review addresses the context of the specific study, relevant extant literature, research methods used, and findings.

Following the review of the two studies, a synthesis—the “so what”—of the findings from the two investigations are formulated. This in turn serves as the underpinning for the call—the “now what”—for additional empirical research into the relationship between the post-university transition and service-learning pedagogies.

What?: The Two Studies

The Post-University Transition (A. Perry, 2012)

Context, literature, and theory. Higher education initiatives for students in transition began with a focus on first-year students (i.e., those transitioning into the university experience). Empirical evidence suggests that these initiatives have increased student retention rates, cognitive skills (active thinking, intellectual engagement, and academic skills), personal (social and emotional) development, satisfaction with the institution (faculty and peers), and engagement in the learning experience (Engberg & Mayhew, 2007; Friedman, 2008; National Resource Center [NRC], n.d.). As interest and research regarding first-year initiatives increased, more attention was also given to final-year students and support initiatives for those leaving the university.

Chickering and Schlossberg (1995) conducted a study of the holistic undergraduate experience. One small aspect of their study explored, through interviews, the cases of six university graduates six months after graduation to discuss their transition. Based on their findings, Chickering and Schlossberg identified three sets of issues that confront students in this transition: making a career connection, clarifying a new identity, and developing a life span perspective. Although the study was an attempt to uncover how higher education practices may be informed by (a) linking transition research and student development theory and (b) exploring experiences of recent graduates, it also demonstrated the need for additional exploration in this area. In 1998, Gardner and Van der Veer edited a book entitled The Senior Year Experience, the purposes of which were to establish a general understanding of the senior-year transition, demonstrate how institutions had already responded, and issue a call for more research focusing on this aspect of student development. Gardner and Van der Veer noted that research was limited at the time “because the topic only recently received attention in the higher education community” (p. 4).

In 1999, the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC) conducted the National Survey of Senior Seminars and Capstone Courses. This survey was distributed to accredited colleges and universities to assess what types of services, programs, and courses they offered to their final-year students. The NRC collected responses from 707 institutions and, based on the survey results, generated five categories into which support efforts for final-year students may be classified: senior seminars and capstone courses; programs that prepare students for careers; opportunities for students to make intellectual connections across course work; events that celebrate the achievement of becoming a senior; and activities that work toward cohesion among the senior-class and alumni. The NRC survey results and later research by Henscheid (2008) demonstrated that few institutions offered formal, comprehensive transition programs and that most institutions offering services for final-year students did so in the form of cross-campus collaborations between career services, alumni relations, and other academic units.
An exploration of the literature revealed a scarcity of evaluative research on the post-university transition, in contrast with the extensive research focusing on the first-year transition. Furthermore, it was concerning to learn that the design of most current final-year programs was not developed from empirical research (NRC, personal communication, February 10, 2009), but from anecdotal experiences and ideas of well-intended practitioners. This discovery helped to establish the theoretical underpinnings of the research reviewed in this article.

Transition research—most notably that of Schlossberg and her colleagues in the field of psychology (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012; Schlossberg, 1981)—supports the notion that students leaving university and entering life-after-study are in transition and need appropriate support. Schlossberg (1981; 1995; 2012) proposed a three-stage transition model consisting of: “approaching transitions,” “taking stock of coping resources,” and “taking charge.” In the first stage of the model, the type, context, and impact of the transition are described, thus suggesting strategies for addressing the transition. The next stage uses the “4S system” (self, situation, support, and strategies) and indicates the need to identify how each person confronts transition differently depending on their individual characteristics (self), their specific transition and environment (situation), and what support they have (Anderson et al., 2012). The third and final stage of Anderson’s model includes strategies for practitioners or individuals to utilize during the transition. Schlossberg’s model provides contextual research about transition that may inform institutions how to approach students preparing to graduate.

Other theories and research suggest types of interventions that may be useful in supporting students as they transition from university study to the workplace, including career development theory (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996), previous research on workplace transition (Gedye, Fender, & Chalkley, 2004; Hanneman & Gardner, 2010), student development theories (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995; Tinto, 1988; Van Gennep, 2004), and previous research on personal/emotional transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998; Vickio, 1990). Based on a synthesis of transition literature and theory, if connections can be made between (a) descriptions and interpretations of how to approach transitions, (b) student development theory and the role of higher education, and (c) the experiences recent graduates have in the post-university transition, then perhaps the higher education sector could create empirically derived practices that foster desired outcomes for students leaving university. This conjecture informed the research design and the research questions explored in A. Perry’s (2012) study.

**Research method.** This qualitative study was based on an interpretive paradigm and utilized symbolic interactionism and narrative theory as frameworks. It explored three research questions:

1. What are the experiences of young, recent university graduates?
2. What are the perspectives of young, recent university graduates?
3. What are the resultant recommendations for institutions wishing to support their graduating students?

Young graduates were defined as those who attended university immediately after high school and were transitioning into a full-time, non-academic environment for the first time. Recent graduates were defined as those who had graduated within the previous year. Twenty graduates participated in six months of research by engaging in monthly interviews and self-reflective journaling. All of the participants were graduates of the same university and were broadly representative of their university’s students in terms of degree attained, ethnicity, and gender.

**Findings.** In exploring research questions 1 and 2, the data indicated four main themes of the post-university transition: shifting identities, searching, unmet expectations, and stabilizers. Sub-themes within shifting identities illustrated that life was different (in terms of comfort zones, relationships, interests, perspectives, routines, and living situation) for the participants before they graduated and that their perceptions had shifted (or were shifting). Within the theme of searching, sub-themes represented more emotional elements of transition—aspects of life that the participants did not have (e.g., certainty and direction) but were seeking (e.g., fulfilment, happiness, and meaningful relationships). The sub-themes in unmet expectations exemplified the participants’ perceptions of themselves, their degree (entitlement), job searching, the workplace transition, earning potential, finances, the economy, and other challenges in the post-university transition. Although these findings illustrated that graduates were experiencing difficulties
in their post-university transition, the data also indicated that participants found stabilizers that helped to support and balance their transition. These included support systems, groups/activities, faith, health, and accepting uncertainties by “living for the moment.”

Based on an interpretation of these findings and other comments made by participants about ways the institution might have helped them, the researchers made recommendations for institutional support around this transition (research question 3). These recommendations provided practical ideas around career preparation, emotional support, and practical life skills, including offering more rigorous internship programs, networking opportunities with professionals, career-skills trainings, ongoing career and counseling services for recent graduates, student support groups, transition awareness education, life-skills trainings, and final-year seminars/courses.

Service-Learning Pedagogy and Student Engagement (L. Perry, 2011)

Context, literature, and theory. Kuh et al. (2005) affirmed that what students do during their time at university is more important to their success than where they are enrolled. According to Kuh et al., seamless student engagement in the teaching and learning process is a key factor in student performance and retention in higher education. Student engagement in “educationally purposeful” activities in higher education has been linked to a variety of positive outcomes, including higher grade point average (Tross, Harper, Osher, & Kneidinger, 2000), cognitive development (Baxter Magolda, 1995), character development (Kuh & Umbach, 2004), greater satisfaction with the university experience, and increased persistence (Kuh et al., 2007).

While what students do is important, the environment—that is, the opportunities that universities offer for engagement—are equally influential. Instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) were developed to measure engaged learning and the ways in which it shapes university policies, programs, and practices. These instruments have been used by nearly 2,000 institutions of higher education in the United States, Canada, South Africa, and the Australasia region (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2015; NSSE, 2015; Strydom & Mentz, 2010).

Using data from the NSSE, Kuh and colleagues (Kuh, 2008; Kuh & O’Donnell, 2013) extracted several high impact practices in higher education, such as learning communities, student-faculty research, and service-learning. These HIPs share six benchmarks—academic challenge, active learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, supportive learning environments, and work-integrated learning—each of which promotes high levels of student engagement (Kuh, 2008; Kuh & O’Donnell, 2013). In Kuh and colleagues’ research, HIPs that incorporated service-learning also produced deep learning, gains in self-perceived general education, personal and social development, and practical competence outcomes. Similarly, Eyler and Giles (1999) identified the service-learning experience as ideal for genuine perspective transformation; they also maintained that service-learning is a useful theory for explaining transformation of students’ personal, civic, moral, and intellectual development.

Stanton’s (2009) literature review uncovered more than 165 different published definitions of service-learning. Considering the complexity and wide spectrum for understanding service-learning, it can be difficult to determine with which interpretation to align. Essentially, the components of service-learning identified by Eyler and Giles (1999), along with the following components identified from other service-learning definitions, served as the associated criteria for service-learning in the second study reviewed for this article: student engagement, community involvement, connection to curriculum, structured reflection, and outcomes associated with academic enhancement, civic engagement, and personal growth. While research on the influence of service-learning in student engagement in U.S. institutions is well-established, similar studies in a New Zealand context are uncommon. One purpose of this study was to address this gap.

Research method. This mixed-methods study, based on a naturalistic inquiry paradigm, explored three research questions:
(1) How does the use of service-learning in two university classes in New Zealand influence students’ experience of benchmarks of engagement?
(2) How do students’ experiences of engagement benchmarks differ depending on the approach to service-learning used (i.e., high intensity vs. low intensity)?
(3) How can students’ experiences inform and potentially influence teaching and learning at the university under investigation and other universities?

The key focus of this investigation was to better understand what New Zealand students with varying levels of engagement (low/moderate/high) experience in two classes in which approaches to service-learning of varying levels of intensity were used and to compare outcomes to previous findings from the field of service-learning. Across the two courses that participated in the quantitative surveys, there was an n of 51 (n = 22 and n = 29, respectively), and 18 participants (nine from each course; three from each engagement classification) were included in the qualitative observations (two per week over a four-month period), artifact analysis (assignments), interviews (two per participant), and focus groups (one per class) for the duration of the semester.

**Findings.** Quantitative data clearly demonstrated an increase in student engagement benchmarks in both service-learning courses. In particular, students in the Approach I (i.e., low-intensity) course showed statistically significant gains in the extent to which they reported that their university experience included academic challenges, active learning, and a supportive learning environment, while students in the Approach II course (i.e., high-intensity) demonstrated gains within all six AUSSE engagement benchmarks. While these survey results demonstrated shifts in students’ engagement (see Tables 1 and 2), the qualitative data provided a thick description of and justification for the shifts (see Figure 1).

**Table 1.** Approach I Service-Learning Course: Preliminary and Follow-Up Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Engagement Benchmark</th>
<th>Preliminary Survey</th>
<th>Follow-Up Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Challenge*</td>
<td>38.77</td>
<td>11.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Learning*</td>
<td>33.13</td>
<td>15.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Staff Interaction</td>
<td>25.22</td>
<td>15.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enriching Educational Experiences</td>
<td>53.36</td>
<td>14.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Learning Environment*</td>
<td>48.55</td>
<td>13.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Integrated Learning</td>
<td>53.00</td>
<td>15.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *Significant at the p < .05, two tailed, n = 22

**Table 2.** Approach II Service-Learning Course: Preliminary and Follow-Up Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Engagement Benchmark</th>
<th>Preliminary Survey</th>
<th>Follow-Up Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Challenge*</td>
<td>45.65</td>
<td>11.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Learning*</td>
<td>35.06</td>
<td>12.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Staff Interaction*</td>
<td>31.27</td>
<td>17.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enriching Educational Experiences*</td>
<td>45.82</td>
<td>13.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Learning Environment*</td>
<td>55.44</td>
<td>12.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Integrated Learning*</td>
<td>39.20</td>
<td>16.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *Significant at the p < .05, two tailed, n = 29
Qualitative findings indicated that service-learning in both Approach I and II promoted four types of learning among both eager and reluctant students that may explain the quantitative shifts in engagement. These included “different experiences,” “consistently being a part of something,” “active learning,” and “feeling that the experience was worthwhile and intrinsic.” Figure 1 represents an emergent model based on the qualitative findings and illustrates how service-learning led to the engaging experiences described by students. The overall theme of the model is that service-learning is an influential approach to teaching, learning, and engagement because it offers different class experiences. Having the opportunity to interact with people within and outside the university led the students to feel that they were connected to what they were doing and that they were consistently a part of something. Based on the students’ previous experiences and service-learning influences, they had the opportunity to practice and apply what they were learning (active learning). This theme described the value students attributed to their projects through their awareness that there was an end-user and that their work was not just going to be a “waste” (intrinsic, worthwhile value).

![Figure 1. New Zealand emergent model of service-learning.](image)

In summary, while the intensity of service-learning within the two courses varied, the consequences for increases in students’ engagement did not appear to differ considerably. Students in both approaches showed marked increases in dimensions of engagement. The qualitative findings suggest that engagement conditions were present in both courses, allowing all students to experience something very different from their other university courses. Some of these experiences may also be interpreted as resources for the post-university transition which are further explored in the following synthesis.
So What? Synthesis of the Two Studies

In this case, synthesis refers to the combination of ideas to formulate a foundation or departure point for understanding new knowledge. The present synthesis is intended to encourage and guide future investigations of the relationship between the outcomes associated with service-learning pedagogy and the types of knowledge, resources, and experiences students in the post-university transition need to build upon. It uses qualitative analysis to explore the connections between the transitional experiences of “shifting identities,” “searching,” “unmet expectations,” and “stabilizers,” and service-learning. To help contextualize this synthesis, we used Kuh et al.’s (2005) explanation of active and collaborative learning:

Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and have opportunities to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings. Furthermore, when students collaborate with others in solving problems or mastering difficult materials, they acquire valuable skills that prepare them to deal with the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily during and after college. (p. 193)

The analysis indicated a connection between the transitional experience of shifting identities and students enrolled in the service-learning courses. Since graduating, the research participants perceived shifting identities within themselves, their relationship with others, and how they were labelled. Similarly, the students in the two service-learning courses recognized a clear departure from their comfort zones and were reimagining what it meant to be a student. They felt as if they were in uncharted territory (in terms of being a part of a group, active/collaborative learning, and the intrinsic/worthwhile perception of their engagement). Their responses also indicated that during service-learning they learned how to navigate this shift in identities. Indeed, outcomes associated with service-learning experiences often include an increased self-awareness (L. Perry, 2011), which further develops one’s own identity.

The experience of searching, associated with the post-university transition, related to a lack of certainty or direction for the recent graduates. They expressed that an aspect of this transition was their increased desire for meaningful relationships. Interestingly, students in the service-learning courses were beginning to transform their perception of learning through the application of knowledge to their projects and through the meaningful relationships and fulfilment associated with their relevant real-world experiences. They began to grapple in a hands-on, realistic way with the types of challenges that occur when working with local organizations in a professional environment.

The transition experience was accompanied by a set of unmet expectations; in particular, the participants expected that their jobs (post-graduation) would be meaningful (fulfilling, enjoyable, and consisting of tasks they deemed as valuable). When their expectations of meaningful employment were not met, they identified that they were unhappy in the workplace. Conversely, students in the service-learning courses identified their real-world projects as intrinsically valuable and worthwhile, and felt that they were a part of a project that helped and contributed to a greater cause. This suggests that providing students with work-integrated service-learning experiences facilitates exposure to community businesses and non-profit organizations, opportunities for project/logistics management experience, and development of a professional network, and teaches transferable skills needed in post-university professional work.

Although the participants addressed many difficult aspects of the post-university transition throughout the research interviews, there were also important elements of their lives that acted as stabilizers, offering support, hope, and balance in their transitions. Chickering and Reisser (1993) included “personal stability and integration” as aspects of a positive identity. As the participants accepted this transition and their shifting identities, and sought support through relationships, group affiliations, faith, health and fitness, and living for the present, they established more stability in their lives. Furthermore, students in the service-learning courses identified similar elements of stability through their participation in the projects which provided a sense of purpose, “being a part of a group,” and having access to “level relationships” with teachers and other experts to assist with problem solving. Through such relationships, support systems are created, which could act as stabilizers to help students navigate
their post-university transition, while also providing guidance in managing their expectations of life-after-
study.

The emergent themes from the data collected from the students in the service-learning courses seem to align with many experiences of recent graduates in the post-university transition. This finding suggests that well-designed service-learning courses may serve as “microcosms of preparation” (learning opportunities) for the post-university transition. One question that arose from this synthesis and that highlights the need for future research is, how do student experiences associated with service-learning lead to a higher level of preparedness for the post-university transition?

Finally, it must be explicitly stated that based on this synthesis, it is ostensible that many of the HIPs (i.e., internships and capstone courses) could serve as vehicles for preparing students for the post-
university transition. The examination of the experiences associated with the post-university transition and the outcomes associated with the students in service-learning environments exposed apparent similarities and crossovers, suggesting that institutions could use practices already in place. Moreover, the application of HIPs as extensions of empirically supported “good practices” (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) could create environments that involve students in purposeful and cooperative learning, connect learning with larger questions and real-world settings, apply active learning, exploration, and problem-solving, engage diverse perspectives and talents, and foster student-faculty contact (Kuh, 2008). Simply stated, other HIPs may also serve as sources for appropriate strategies to support students through and beyond graduation.

Now What?: Conclusion

For many students, graduation does not directly lead to employment or meet their expectations for future options (A. Perry, 2012). Considering the increasingly diverse student body, global economic changes, and rising costs of higher education, helping final-year students make this transition has never been more important. In order to implement initiatives that are most impactful for graduating students, researchers and practitioners must first explore and understand their experiences and perspectives in conjunction with empirical practices (e.g., HIPs).

The results of the post-university transition study identified many institutional strategies for supporting students who are transitioning out of college, specifically in regard to career preparation, emotional support, and developing practical life skills. Drawing from these findings and synthesizing them with the findings of the service-learning study, there may be transferable strategies that use service-learning in ways that help students in their post-university transition. Such strategies may include, but are not limited to: service-learning as a vehicle for career preparation and developing professional skills, increased self-awareness/identity development, and building professional networks and mentoring partnerships. Presumably, utilizing outcomes-based practices that institutions already employ, such as service-learning, could be a realistic and immediate vehicle to begin meeting students’ transition needs.

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